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ABSTRACT

Combining two issues significant in contemporary broadcasting--the influence of television on children and the role of women as portrayed by the media, this study analyzed the image of female children in 294 television commercials shown from eight in the morning until noon every Saturday from November 10, 1973, until December 8, 1973. Although the child was used as the primary unit, appearing on screen for at least 3 seconds or having at least one line of dialogue, other items also qualified for coding, for example, number of males and females, the product advertised, voice-over, setting, and the primary role of the female. Using Holsti's formula for multiple coders, dual coder reliability was established at .99. Results showed television as trying to orient the female child to traditional feminine roles in society as the typical wife and mother concerned about her appearance and accepting the role of a sex object. The concept of women as being independent and successful in the business world is not shown. (JM)

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THE IMAGE OF THE FEMALE CHILD ON SATURDAY MORNING TELEVISION COMMERCIALS

by

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The average child spends more time each year watching TV, than he spends in the classroom and often more time with the TV than he spends with working parents. And during that time he sees from 22,000 to 25,000 commercials, in fact a child who is only a moderate TV viewer spends almost four hours each week watching commercials alone.

The Christian Science Monitor
November 5, 1973

THE IMAGE OF THE FEMALE CHILD ON SATURDAY MORNING TV COMMERCIALS

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Two issues which have been of significant concern in contemporary broadcasting circles have been the influence of TV on children and the role of women portrayed by the media.[1]

The purpose of this study is to combine these two areas of concern in an analysis of the image of female children on Saturday morning TV commercials.

METHOD

Data analyzed in this study included Saturday morning TV commercials from November 10th to December 8th, 1973. The hours of analysis were 8:00 A.M. until noon on a local CBS affiliate.[2] The entire morning time period consisted of cartoons: "The Flintstones," "Bailey's Comets," "Scooby Doo Movies," "My Favorite Martian," "Jeannie," "Speed Buggy," and "Josie and the "Pussycats." A total of 344 commercials were witnessed. Included in this total are 52 animated commercials which could not be classified because they did not show people, just creatures (martians, etc.) Thus, 294 commercials were analyzed. Also, 20 of the 344 showed adults with children. Although these commercials were coded, it was the child which was used as the primary unit

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for content analysis.[3]

To qualify as a coded item, the child character had to fulfill either of the following criteria--appeared on the screen for at least three seconds, or have at least one line of dialogue. Also noted were the following variables for each commercial: number of males and females, the product advertised, voice-over, setting, and the primary role of the female. The "primary role" aspect was based on portrayed role of the character. For example, a little girl shown holding and pampering a baby doll or cooking with her toy appliances in the kitchen would be considered portraying the role of a mother and housewife. Another example would be the "model" image which was recorded according to those children advertising products which emphasized one's appearance and concern for being beautiful.

Using Holsti's formula for multiple coders, dual coder reliability was established at .99.

RESULTS

The products advertised in the commercials can be placed into six categories: "female cosmetics," "car-related products," "female dolls," "games," "food," and "other." We found the food and male-related products to be most prevalent.

Out of the 294 commercials coded, the major category for those with female children was food (39%) followed by games (27%)

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and dolls (26%). As seen in Table 1, females were also less likely to be in commercials for cars, trucks, planes, and related products, supporting the stereotype that a female has no interest or ability in so masculine an area as mechanics or machines.

In classifying the commercials according to the "people involved" our analysis showed that only 57 out of the 294 commercials showed just girls, compared to 102 commercials which included only boys. When in a group of both male and female children, the female was almost always outnumbered by the male, two to one.

The single largest portrayed occupation for the female child was that of the mother and housewife (53%). As indicated in Table III, the second most frequently portrayed occupation was the model (29%). Evaluating the category of portrayed visible male occupations, we found that only 2% were shown in the comparable role of the husband and father. The largest classification was that of race car drivers with 39%. Similar percentages were also shown in the classifications of military personnel and pilots. Concurrent with previous research these commercials also mirror the restricted range of jobs open to females in real life. Noticeable was the absence of any codings for female athletes, businesswomen, scientists, or professors.

One job in TV commercials that is still almost entirely dominated by males is the off-camera "voice-over" announcer. In this

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study only 11.4% used a female voice, compared to 79% using a male voice-over. When a female voice was used, the commercials dealt only with female-related products. Advertisers still apparently consider the male voice more authoritative, which may be one reason for this contrast.

This study also noted the setting of the commercial. According to the results, a little girl's place is in her bedroom. 88% of the females were seen inside their bedroom compared to 6% of the males. Boys were significantly more likely to be seen outdoors. We found that when girls were in a setting other than their bedroom they were with boys. Girls were practically never found in an outside setting except when with boys in the advertisement of a product for both males and females.

Beyond the data interpretation from the content categories, the authors did make some observations on the attire of the children. In contrast to the casual, disordered clothes of the male, the female child was always seen more formally, usually in a dress. Her total appearance was stereotyped; a hair was never out of place, never a wrinkle in her dress. In short, she was "sugar and spice and everything nice."

Boys and their male-related products far outnumbered the female-related products. Even in products that are not related specifically to either sex the appearance of males far outnumbered the females. For example, in the Apple Jacks cereal com-

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mercial a group of children were sitting around the breakfast table and the ratio was three boys to one girl. The Apple Jacks commercial is not unique. We found this situation to be typical.

The fashion of the female child does keep pace with the time. However, her occupation still remains that of the housewife and mother. It does not show the idea of women being independent and successful in the business world, but merely that of the all time "thought to be" homemaker.

CONCLUSION

It appears after completing this research that TV is trying to orient the female child to the traditional role she should play in society. This role sees her as the mother with her child, or as a woman preoccupied with her appearance. She is portrayed as the conventional little girl programmed to grow up and be the typical housewife and mother. In commercials analyzed in this study the female is frequently shown possessing a family responsibility. The little girl is almost always shown playing the role of mother or trying to act a little more grown up. The Barbie Vanity Case commercial typifies this observation when the little girl closes by saying, "It's all like being grown up." In other words, TV is also indoctrinating the female child into accepting the role of a sex object.

This research showed the television medium, at least on Satur-

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day morning TV commercials, does not show the increasing importance that women now have in society. The child sees very limited diversification in the female role beyond the homemaker.

Since TV is a creation and reflection of the modern world, it seems to have failed to keep pace with the changing, growing, and liberated female. In this study we attempted to examine the roles of the female as portrayed through TV commercials. Since the child spends so much time watching TV, and since TV acts as an agent of socialization, hopefully it will become a reflection of our society and not merely an illusion.

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TABLE I

PRODUCT CATEGORIES OF ADS

WITH AND WITHOUT FEMALE CHILDREN

PRODUCT TYPE	ADS WITH FEMALES (N=190)	ADS WITHOUT FEMALES (N=103)
Food	37%	14%
Games	27	36
Female Dolls	26	0
Female cosmetics	5	0
Cars, planes, and related products	3	47
Other	1	1

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TABLE II

SETTING OF MALE AND FEMALE CHILDREN IN ADS

SETTING	ADS INVOLVING JUST FEMALES (N=57)	ADS INVOLVING JUST MALES (N=102)
Bedroom	88%	6%
Kitchen	1	0
Living/Family room	7	21
Outdoors	4	63
Restaurant	0	4
Limbo (no definite location)	0	6

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TABLE III

PORTRAYED OCCUPATIONS OF MALE AND FEMALE CHILDREN

FEMALE (N=68)		MALE (N=83)	
Housewife/Mother	53%	Race Driver	39%
Model	29	Military	29
Stewardess	9	Pilot	22
Celebrity/Singer/Dancer	6	Professional Athlete	5
Other	3	Husband/Father	2
		Celebrity	1
		Businessman	1
		Radio/TV Interviewer	1

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NOTES

1. Two recent research projects in these areas have included:

   Robert K. Baker and Sandra J. Ball, "Mass Media and Violence," Vol. 9, A Report to National Commission on Causes and Prevention of Violence (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1969), p. 242; and

   Joseph R. Dominick and Gail E. Rauch, "The Image of Women in Network TV Commercials," Journal of Broadcasting. XVI(Summer, 1973), 259-65.

2. CBS was chosen due to clear reception of the local CBS affiliate in the Greencastle, Indiana community. The authors realize that generalizations beyond CBS should be made with at least some degree of caution.

3. Although not the purpose of this research, an interesting future investigation would be to view the image of adult females in the same time period. A casual observation of the authors found that in almost all cases the adult female was playing the role of a mother.